

LifeBalance®

For your life journey.

Helping Your Older Relative Make Good Medical Decisions

Your mother says her arthritis medication isn't working and wonders if she should switch to another drug. Your father worries that he's making a mistake by not having surgery for his prostate cancer, even though his doctor doesn't think he needs it. Your aunt has worn a pacemaker for years, but now the device has been recalled by the manufacturer and she isn't sure whether to have it replaced.

If your relative faces medical decisions like these, easy answers may not exist. But you can help by gathering information, getting help from others, and understanding and respecting your relative's wishes and values.

Gathering information and medical records

If your relative has or may develop a health condition, he or she may need to make medical decisions very quickly. Making those decisions will be easier if you take the following steps:

- ❖ Organize your relative's medical records. To make good medical decisions, your relative and his doctors will need accurate and up-to-date information on his health. And he may not be able to provide this himself if, for example, he is unconscious after a fall. So it's a good idea to work with your relative to make a folder that contains lists of 1) his health conditions and the names and phone numbers of doctors who have treated them; 2) any prescription and nonprescription medications he takes; and 3) copies of helpful papers, such as a health care proxy, which would give someone else the right to make medical decisions for him if he couldn't make them himself. Ask your relative to tell you where he keeps this file or if he would let you make a copy. And if your relative has moved to a new location, be sure that his former doctors have sent his medical records to the physicians who are treating him now.
- ❖ Do research on the Internet and elsewhere. Both you and your relative may be better informed about difficult medical decisions if you do some

research together about the treatment options. A recent New York Times/CBS News poll found that 44 percent of patients who received a diagnosis gathered information from other sources besides their doctors, including the Internet, friends, and relatives. But remember that there's a lot of inaccurate medical information on the Web, so stick to respected sites. A good place to begin learning about most health conditions is the National Library of Medicine's online database for more than 700 health conditions, MedlinePlus, <http://www.medlineplus.gov>. Another helpful resource is the Web site for the Mayo Clinic, <http://www.mayoclinic.com>, which has clear and accurate articles on a vast array of conditions and treatments.

- ❖ Get in touch with the Center for Patient Partnerships if your relative has cancer or another serious illness. Founded in 2001 at the University of Wisconsin, this innovative Center helps patients with cancer and other serious conditions find doctors and make good decisions about health care. You can reach the Center at <http://www.law.wisc.edu/patientadvocacy> or by calling 608-265-6267. Other national organizations can help you and your relative make good decisions about other conditions. Search online for the name of your relative's health condition and the word "association" or "organization."

Getting help from others

Getting others involved may make it easier to help your relative make good medical decisions, especially if the two of you have a strained relationship or if you are too emotionally involved to look at the situation calmly. In addition to trusted friends and family members, good sources of help include the following:

- ❖ Your relative's doctor. Consider talking to your relative's doctor if you have concerns about her everyday health decisions and haven't resolved these by talking directly to her — for example, if you are worried about her poor diet, lack of exercise, or inability to keep track of her medications. Many older adults are more willing to listen to their doctors than to family members on issues like these.



- ❖ Other physicians. You may need to talk to another doctor — or two or three doctors — to help your relative when he has to make a major health decision. And if the situation isn't an emergency, many doctors will encourage getting a second or third opinion so you and your relative will have peace of mind about any decision you make. You can search for a doctor qualified to give another opinion by going to the Web site for the American Medical Association, <http://www.ama-assn.org>, and following the link that says "Doctor Finder."
- ❖ A geriatric care manager. You may want to get in touch with a geriatric care manager if a health condition involves decisions that are too big or complex for you and your relative to resolve on your own. A geriatric care manager is a professional, often a nurse or social worker, who is trained to help older people and their families find appropriate services and treatment. For example, if you and your relative are having trouble deciding whether she can recover at home after surgery, a care manager can do a home evaluation and make recommendations. You can find a care manager through <http://www.caremanager.org>, the Web site for the National Association of Professional Geriatric Care Managers.

Respecting your relative's wishes and values

Perhaps the most important thing you can do to help your relative make good medical decisions is to show him that you respect his wishes and values. He will be more likely to accept your help if he believes that you truly understand his concerns. So make it a top priority to listen carefully to your relative's needs at every stage of the decision-making process. The best help you can give your relative might be the reassurance that, no matter what medical decision he makes, you will be there to support him.